

Eye for art

Louise Alexander-O'Loughlin talks to art dealer Ben Fry, owner of the distinguished Wyecliffe Gallery in York Road, Weybridge, which showcases an eclectic mix of some of the most sought after artwork in the UK, as acquired by the likes of Simon Cowell and Vladimir Putin.

Ben, what inspired you to become an art dealer?

I read history at university, which incorporated history of art, so that element was rather forced on me, but I found I became really interested in that aspect of the degree. Little did I know it would become part of my occupation.

What's your experience in the industry?

During my years at university I started up a small business creating websites for art galleries. It was well received and, as my business grew during and after university, I became exposed to a wide range of galleries and networked with many artists. I then applied for a sales position in a gallery in London, and basically walked in to ask for a job. Unbeknown to me, there was also a gallery manager position available too. Much to my surprise, they offered me that role, which I of course accepted immediately. So my website business and the gallery kept me very busy and, at the same time, I absorbed as much information about the industry as I could.

It wasn't long before I was offered a position at the gallery's head office in London, where I was to oversee the group's eight galleries.

A key aspect of my role was to understand why the galleries were underperforming and to make them work.

Why did you decide to open Wyecliffe Galleries?

After managing eight galleries, I found I wanted my own. I knew by then how to run a gallery, and moreover how to do it successfully. So I sourced Queen's Road in Weybridge.

Why didn't you stay in London and source a gallery there?

Primarily because in London units were hard to come by. However, in Weybridge the gallery was perfectly located, with ideal demographics, and I knew it could work. I took the property immediately and was trading just two weeks after completing the acquisition.

So, your gallery has the capacity to hold 100 pieces of art.

How do you decide which artists' work you want to showcase at Wyecliffe Galleries?

When you have been in the industry for as long as I have, you tune into the buzz about which artist is up and coming – who's hot property!

Have you sourced any artists that were up and coming and now are established?

Yes, such as the now best-selling published artist in the UK, Kerry Darlington. We have sold work for her for seven years and have watched her grow. In the last three years she has achieved incredible international exposure and we are commissioned by her to sell both unique editions and originals, access to which is extremely rare.

Which other famous artists' work do you exhibit?

Mark Evans – he is a sensation and we are incredibly lucky to have his artwork in the gallery. His preferred medium is leather, a textile he finds appealing both aesthetically and functionally. He barely scratches the surface of the leather with a knife to produce



Snow White & Rose Red by Kerry Darlington



illustrations that are dramatic, symbolic and very large. Mark has recently been commissioned by the people who own the World Trade Centre 'Freedom Tower' in NYC.

Have any celebrities bought any of the work created by Mark Evans?

Yes, Simon Cowell is a fan of Mark's work, and he purchased a large piece from Mark's collection. Also, Vladimir Putin owns a piece of Mark's work.

How do you put a figure on a piece of art?

The artist wants to obtain as much money as possible from that piece, obviously. They leave it up to us to decide at what price to sell the piece. It's all about trust. We base it on quality of work and the name of the artist, and if the piece doesn't hit the wall for long periods we increase the price. There is a lot of research into it before we hang a figure on a piece of artwork.

Do you travel the world to source artists, and where is the most obscure place you have found one?

I was recently in New York at a huge convention. The artists pay a fortune to be there, and there are dozens and dozens of artists with stands exhibiting their work hoping you'll pick them to be in your gallery. It was inspiring, but there was nothing particularly new or fresh. Then, while I was in the exhibition, I received an email from Daniel Diaz, who sent me a picture of his artwork from the UK. I fell in love with his work, and realised he was in Woking. I laughed to myself at the time, thinking I'd just flown for eight hours and the artist I wanted was just round the corner from me.

Didn't your wife have something to do with you taking on board Shane McCoubrey?

Yes, she did. Shane was featured in an episode of Relocation, Relocation which my wife was watching one evening, and she told me to make contact with him. I was overloaded with artists at the time and didn't need any more. Unbeknown to me, she made an 'executive decision' and set up an appointment for Shane to come to the gallery. He arrived at the front door after travelling for miles with a pair of pictures under his arm, original fine art landscapes and contemporary abstract paintings. They were phenomenal.

I took the pictures in and they both sold the same day! Two years on, and we became his agent. His pictures now sell all over the world. So, yes, my amazing wife does help.

Do you exhibit a wide variety of pieces in the gallery?

Landscape, portraiture, abstract, cityscapes, floral, naïve art, dark art, edgy contemporary – we certainly have an array of artwork.

Do people come into the gallery to source a specific piece of artwork?

Many people come into the gallery and have no idea what they want to purchase, they just know they want some amazing art. We guide them and are very honest with them about what suits their needs, and whether something has the potential to become an investment.

Do people just buy art as an investment?

Yes, some would prefer to invest in up and coming artists as opposed to sticking cash into an ISA account.

If someone buys a piece from you, is it possible to re-sell the artwork back to you?

Absolutely, but it's amazing – nine times out of ten, customers prefer to keep hold of it as they have fallen in love with the piece.

If I have a blank wall that needs filling with some artwork, but I'm unsure of what to fill it with, could you guide me?

Yes, we do on-site visits and are happy to source artwork for a particular place in your home.

So, tell me about your TV debut.

I was invited to take part in Channel 4's documentary 'Posh Pawn', where C4 goes behind the scenes at Prestige Pawnbrokers. It was fantastic and I really enjoyed being on the show. ●

essence info

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